Chapter 31 Just a Coincidence?

HEEEY, LI'L LADY!
OH?
IT MUST BE SERIOUS IF HE'S GONE OUT OF HIS WAY TO COME AND TELL ME.
SIR LI HAKU!
WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?
THERE'S TROUBLE AFOOT!
A THIEF AT THE SCENE OF A FIRE?
WHAT DID THEY MAKE OFF WITH?
REMEMBER THAT FIRE AT THE STORE-HOUSE?
IT LOOKS LIKE ANOTHER STOREHOUSE WAS BURGLED AMID THE CHAOS.

WHISPER
RITUAL IMPLE-MENTS... AND FROM WHAT I HEAR...
...MORE THAN ONE OF THEM TOO.
ZWOOP
BECKON
BECKON
IT MUST BE SOMETHING BETTER DISCUSSED AWAY FROM PRYING EARS.
WAS IT JUST A CASE OF POOR MANAGE-MENT?
NO, NOT QUITE.
I FEEL LIKE I'VE HEARD THIS STORY BEFORE ...
HE GOT IT FROM EATING HIS FAVORITE SEAWEED AND HAS YET TO REGAIN CON-SCIOUSNESS.
SO HE'S IN NO SHAPE TO GET BACK TO WORK.
THE THING IS, NO ONE'S ACTUALLY IN CHARGE OF THAT STORE-HOUSE RIGHT NOW.
THE FORMER MANAGER...
...CAME DOWN WITH A BAD CASE OF FOOD POISONING NOT TOO LONG AGO.
FOOD POISON-ING?

HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT?
YES, THAT'S RIGHT!
ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT THE GOURMET OFFICIAL WITH A TASTE FOR DELICACIES?
LONG STORY.
PAT
HAVE YOU SPOKEN TO THE PREVIOUS MANAGER ...?
BEFORE THE GOURMET, THERE WAS A HIGH-RANKING OFFICIAL IN CHARGE FOR THE LONG TERM, BUT HE DIED LAST YEAR.
AND I COULDN'T GET TOO MANY DETAILS.
A THEFT THAT TOOK PLACE AT THE SAME TIME AS THE FIRE.
A STOREHOUSE MANAGER ABSENT FROM HIS POST WITH A CASE OF FOOD POISONING.
THAT WOULD BE SOME COINCI-DENCE, INDEED.
HMMM.
COULD YOU TELL ME ANYTHING ABOUT HIM?

ANYWAY, HE HAD A REAL SWEET TOOTH AND...
WHAT WAS HIS NAME, AGAIN?
THE OLD MAN WAS WELL-KNOWN FOR BEING STRAIT-LACED.
WAIT, HOW DID YOU KNOW?
LONGER STORY.
SNAP
OH! YES! THAT WAS HIS NAME!
WOULD YOU HAPPEN TO BE TALKING ABOUT SIR KOUNEN?
ARE THESE REALLY ALL JUST COINCI-DENCES ...?
BUT IF EACH OF THESE INCIDENTS ...
...WAS CAUSED INTENTION-ALLY...
I FIRST CAME ACROSS SIR KOUNEN LAST YEAR...
...WHEN JINSHI TOLD ME ABOUT HIM.
HE DIED FROM INGESTING TOO MUCH SALT.

I TRIED TO GIVE IT BACK, BUT THE STOREKEEP WOULD HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT!
SO ABOUT THIS PIPE YOU LEFT WITH ME...
OH, THE ONE THAT CAUSED THE FIRE.
OH RIGHT! I FORGOT!
SO WHY COME TO ME WITH THIS?
RUMMAGE ガソゴソ
ACCORDING TO HIM...
...HE ESCORTED A LONE COURT LADY WHO WAS WALKING AROUND IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT TO THE PALACE GATES...
HE TOLD ME HE RECEIVED IT FROM SOME COURT LADY.
GIVEN ITS FINE MAKE, I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE SOMETHING HE TREASURED...
A COURT LADY?
...WOULD WANT TO MAKE USE OF SUCH A NICE PRESENT RIGHT AWAY.
IT'S LOGICAL TO THINK THAT A SIMPLE STOREKEEP...
...AND SHE GAVE HIM THIS PIPE IN THANKS.

IT WOULDN'T NECESSARILY ALWAYS BE THE CASE, BUT...
...IF WE ASSUME THE COURT LADY GAVE THE STORE-KEEP THIS PIPE...
...TO CREATE A DIVERSION THAT WOULD REDUCE SECURITY ON THE STORE-HOUSE SHE WAS AFTER...
WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THIS COURT LADY, SIR?
YEAH, I ASKED ABOUT HER.
BUT IT WAS SO DARK THAT THE STOREKEEP COULDN'T REALLY MAKE OUT HER FACE.
AND SHE WAS WEARING A SCARF, WHAT WITH IT BEING WINTER AND ALL.
PER-HAPS...
...SHE WAS WEARING IT FOR THE PURPOSE OF HIDING HER FACE.
YEAH.
ALL HE COULD TELL ME WAS THAT SHE WAS TALLER THAN MOST WOMEN ...
...AND THAT SHE HAD THE SMELL OF MEDICINE HANGING ABOUT HER.

YOU GOT ANY IDEAS ABOUT WHO SHE MIGHT BE?
BASED ON WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HER HEIGHT, I KNOW IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN YOU.

A TALL WOMAN...
...SMELLING OF MEDI-CINE...

I HAVE A PRETTY GOOD GUESS.

BUT...
LI HAKU HAS GOOD INSTINCTS.
IT MIGHT BE BEST TO TELL HIM THE TRUTH INSTEAD OF TRYING TO HIDE IT POORLY.
YOU MUSTN'T SPECULATE ALOUD.
GASP
ARE YOU TELLING ME THERE'LL BE SOMETHING TO FIND IF I START DIGGING?!
HMMM.
I MEAN, THERE'VE BEEN THINGS I WOULDN'T HAVE NOTICED IF YOU HADN'T PUT ME ONTO THEM...
I'M NOT SURE.
THE ACCIDENT AND THE INCIDENTS WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT ASIDE...
...HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ANYTHING ELSE UNUSUAL?
131

WELL, WHICH IS IT, THEN?
SLUMP
MAYBE, MAYBE NOT. YOU NEVER KNOW.
YEAH, YEAH.
MAYBE EVEN THREE.
IT'S NOT UNCOMMON FOR TWO THINGS TO HAPPEN COINCI-DENTALLY.
WHAT IF SOMEONE LIKE OUR TALL COURT LADY IS AT THE CENTER OF IT ALL?
WHEN YOU HAVE A SERIES OF COIN-CIDENCES, THOUGH...
...IT SUGGESTS THERE IS DELIBERATE INTENT AT PLAY.
WITH SO LITTLE TO GO ON, THERE'S NO POINT IN IMPLICATING SUIREI NOW.

WAH HA HA HA HA!
SMACK
ばし、
YOU'RE SMARTER THAN YOU LOOK, Y'KNOW!
I GET IT!
AND YOU'RE AS STUPIDLY STRONG AS YOU LOOK.
ばし
SMACK
PHEW...
PLEASE DON'T BE SO ROUGH WITH ME.
ゴゴゴゴゴゴゴゴ
WELL, WELL... AREN'T YOU TWO HAVING A GRAND OLD TIME?

ACK!
FWIP
I'D HARDLY CALL IT THAT.
I THINK I'LL BE GOING NOW...
GLARE
YOU AND THAT SOLDIER SEEM QUITE CHUMMY.
NOON
DO WE, NOW?
HE SIMPLY WANTED TO CONSULT WITH ME ABOUT SOMETHING THAT WAS ON HIS MIND.
IF THIS IS ALL IN FACT LINKED TO KOUNEN'S DEMISE...
...THEN IT ALSO CONCERNS JINSHI.
SIR JINSHI.
THERE IS SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS WITH YOU.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT IS?
RATHER THAN ACTIVELY ENSURING A SPECIFIC INCIDENT OCCURS ...
AT THIS POINT, I'M UNCLEAR ON WHAT THEY'RE AFTER.
...SOMEONE HAS SET NUMEROUS TRAPS AND IS PATIENTLY WAITING FOR ANY ONE OF THEM TO BE SPRUNG.
THAT'S HOW IT SEEMS TO ME.
YES...
THERE DOES APPEAR TO BE SOME KIND OF LINK, DOESN'T THERE?
I THINK SO, SIR.
IT'S HARD TO DETERMINE IF EACH INCIDENT HAPPENED BY CHANCE OR BY CALCULATION.
AND WE CAN'T DISCOUNT THE POSSIBILITY THAT THESE REALLY ARE ALL JUST COINCIDENCES.
SO YOU'RE OF THE MIND THAT THERE ARE OTHER TRAPS LYING IN WAIT?
IT'S CERTAINLY POSSIBLE, BUT I CAN'T SAY FOR SURE.

YOU'RE NOT KEEN ON GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF IT?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
I AM BUT A SIMPLE MAID.
I DO ONLY WHAT I'M TOLD.
UH-HUH...
I DON'T STICK MY NOSE INTO THESE THINGS FOR THE FUN OF IT.
I'M JUST OBSERVANT, AND ON OCCASION, MY OBSERVATIONS GIVE ME PAUSE.
...WHY DO SO MANY PEOPLE INSIST ON COMPLICATING MY LIFE WITH RISKY BUSINESS IN THE FIRST PLACE?
SPEAKING OF WHICH...
THINK
WELL, HOW ABOUT THIS?
SWISH
SWISH
I HEARD TELL OF SOMETHING INTERESTING ...
...WHEN I WAS OUT VISITING MERCHANTS THE OTHER DAY.

FLAP
IT WAS CALLED THUS.
BEZOAR

A BEZOAR, WHICH IS A GALL-STONE FROM AN OX, IS A KIND OF MEDICINE.
IT'S SAID THAT ONLY ONE IN EVERY THOUSAND OF THE BEASTS PRODUCES ONE...
...SO IT'S TREATED AS ONE OF THE RAREST AND MOST VALUED OF CURES.
A POOR APOTHECARY FROM THE PLEASURE DISTRICT COULD NORMALLY NEVER EVEN HOPE TO LAY EYES ON, MUCH LESS OWN, SOMETHING SO DESIRABLE.
WHY, THIS EUNUCH!
IS HE SAYING HE'LL ACTUALLY GIVE ME ONE?!
HFF!
HFF!
...I TAKE IT YOU WANT IT?
OH, DO I EVER!!
XIAO-MAO.

OH!
すSHP
?
SMIRK
にまあ
NOW THERE'S THE ENTHUSIASM I WAS LOOKING FOR!
MY APOL-OGIES, SIR.
PAT
PAT

FOR A JOB WELL DONE, YES.
NOW LET ME GIVE YOU THE DETAILS.
WILL YOU TRULY LET ME HAVE THIS?
BEZOAR
IF HE'S WILLING TO GIVE ME A BEZOAR IN RETURN FOR MY EFFORTS...
YOUR WISH IS MY COM-MAND, SIR!
YOU HEARD THE GIRL, GAO SHUN.
GET TO IT.